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Office of University
Communications

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Michelle Palacio ('13) Works with Sports Ministry to Reach Youth

The daughter of international missionaries, Michelle Palacio ('13) never thought the occupation was her calling in life. That was until a summer internship with a familiar mission organization showed her how she could blend her passion for global issues with resources to improve lives. Experiences during and after that internship changed her perspective and, ultimately, led to a career opportunity after her graduation from Gardner-Webb University.

Palacio was offered a job with Serving In Mission (SIM) in Charlotte, N.C., as a special assistant to SIM USA President Bruce Johnson. The agency has, for more than 120 years, shared the Gospel message, equipped churches and served the needy around the world. SIM now sends more than 1,600 missionaries to more than 60 countries. Since taking that position, she has transitioned to working with Sports Friends, a ministry of SIM.

“Our focus is to train and equip local church leaders to use sports as a tool to reach out to youth, their families, and their communities,” Palacio explained. “Forty-three percent of the world’s population is under the age of 25 and, in developing countries where we work, that number increases to 60 percent.”

She said these young people could be facing many struggles, including religious and cultural identity, drugs, alcohol, sexuality, gangs, poverty, broken homes and unemployment.

“Sports provide a natural environment for discussions about character issues and life lessons such as self-control, teamwork, honesty, respect for authority, and commitment,” Palacio noted. “These discussions often present opportunities to transition to the truths of the Bible. Today, SIM has trained over 8,000 coaches in Africa, Asia and Latin America.”

As the International Support Services Administrative Coordinator for Sports Friends, Palacio is based in the United States, but travels around the world.

“We are currently working in 13 countries with staff representing 15 different nationalities. I am grateful for how well prepared I was for my role through my time at Gardner-Webb,” she observed. “As a former athlete I am able to relate to both our coaches

and the youth. Through my years in the Gardner-Webb Student Government Association, I learned a great deal about managing multiple projects. My degrees in political science and global studies gave me a great understanding of cultural differences within my own team and a better framework for understanding the sociopolitical issues that impact the youth we serve. Gardner-Webb prepared me well—not just for a single profession, but to apply my experiences to the real world.”

Palacio was student body president her senior year. She was also a member of the women’s swim team and worked as a student recruitment ambassador in the Undergraduate Admissions Office. She was honored at graduation to receive the Most Outstanding Female Graduate Award, Williams H. Withrow Political Science Award, and the Global Studies Award.

“My experience at Gardner-Webb was unique because of the people and the environment,” Palacio shared. “From professors who invested in me, to roommates, teammates, and classmates who challenged me to be a better friend, athlete, and student, I would not be the person I am today without all those people in my life. Gardner-Webb gave me the opportunity to learn and grow in an environment that encouraged my diverse interests. My faith shapes so much of my life, and my experiences at Gardner-Webb showed me how my faith is integrated into every aspect of it.”